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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that investigated the strategies that educational leaders use to implement change, the characteristics they bring to their role, and the contextual factors that influence their efforts toward change. The urban elementary school described in this paper was selected as one of five school sites in five states in the southwestern United States. Dibert Elementary School was located in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, served primarily African-American and Hispanic students, and had been involved in change. When threatened by school closure in the mid-1970s, Dibert became a magnet school. Data were collected through interviews with the principal, special education teachers, paraprofessional support staff, office staff, parents, and community members, and through indepth interviews with the school's past three principals. Findings analyze how the principals facilitated the emergence of the following four functions essential to change in a learning community--reducing isolation; increasing staff capacity; providing a caring, productive environment, and promoting increased quality. One table is included. Contains 29 references. (LMI)

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Principals and the New Paradigm: Schools as Learning Communities

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Principals and the New Paradigm:
Schools as Learning Communities

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In a three-story saltbox-style building on a broad boulevard of a large urban city, children and teachers gather for Morning Meeting. They meet today, as they do every day, in Dibert School's "auditorium." Calling this meeting place an auditorium is a misnomer of sorts in that the children and teachers sit on a concrete floor rather than in seats. There are no seats, and only the presence of a stage indicates that the place is an auditorium.

The school that exists here is far more, however, than the less-than-marvelous facility in which it is housed. This is a place where children are valued, respected, cared for. Voices from the faculty portray this difference. "We are here for the children, not the other way around." Just as the children feel cared for, the faculty is nurtured. "We welcome people and take them to our hearts. There is a lot of spontaneity and creative work going on. Teachers help out parents and parents help out teachers — it's like a family." "I looked around and decided this is the school where I want my child to be . . . and it was the kind of school I would like to teach in."

There is the feeling of "a community that works here together; we support each other, and that comes across for four hundred kids, where we strive for a social/racial balance in our student enrollment."

> If the world is made up of rainbow kids, then we need to have that here too.
>
> We believe in the whole child, that all children can learn. We are trying to teach them to deal with the whole world, rather than just make it to the next grade.
>
> We believe that children are human beings, not just miniature adults; they are very complicated, wonderful persons, and are not around just to be seen and not heard. . . . This school is louder and kids are more active; they have a lot of room to grow.

Teachers in this school have a lot of room to grow as well. They gain individually from each other. "I am learning so much because constantly somebody is putting something in my mailbox to try out. I have been given a lot of room to fail and to try something else." It is a relaxed atmosphere in which teachers can use their own style without concern about "someone hanging over your head." The guideline is to use what works for the teacher and the children.

If teachers have creative ideas, they feel they can try them out without first "running to the office" to get permission. Teachers spend time — a lot of extra time — at the school, putting in the extra effort required to arrange new experiences for children. Not only do they gain *individually from* each other, but they learn *collectively with* each other through regularly scheduled "faculty study."

Methodology

Dibert was one of five sites identified for study by the Leadership for Change Project (LFC) of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. The project staff were interested in gaining more insights into the strategies that educational leaders use to implement change, in the characteristics they bring to their role, and in the contextual factors that influence their change efforts. A site was selected in each of the five states that SEDL serves.

Site selection was based on the potential for collecting rich data about the aforementioned topics of interest, so that case studies might contribute to the development of theory about leadership and school change (Yin, 1984). John Dibert Elementary School was selected because of its history of shared decision making and school-based management. Its selection was further reinforced by the enthusiastic reports of local colleagues who had worked with and who knew the school.

The LFC project's work was designed to study a variety of sites that covered such factors as school levels (elementary, middle, senior high) and location (urban, suburban, rural), but another critical criterion was that there would be a significant population of minority students and students at risk. Dibert fit urban, elementary, low SES, African-American/Hispanic descriptors.

Further, the project divided the sites to be selected into two types: those that had been involved in change for some time (historical sites) and those that were just starting an effort (developmental sites). Dibert fit the historical category.

The first data collection at Dibert consisted of tape-recorded face-to-face interviews with the principal, all full-time regular and special education classroom teachers and part-time itinerant specialists: P.E. teacher, music teacher, librarian, nurse, social worker. In addition, office staff, some parents, and community members were visited.

An open, unstructured, qualitative approach was used for the interviews: the respondents selected what they would talk about from a range of broadly stated questions and parameters. For the qualitative approach, Patton (1990) advises "that the persons being interviewed respond in their own words to express their own personal perspectives . . . the response format should be open-ended. . . . The interviewer never supplies and predetermines the phrases or categories that must be used by respondents to express themselves" (pp. 289-290).

The major objectives of the data collection effort were (a) to understand the school's current philosophy and operations through respondents' descriptions; (b) to understand "where the school had come from" in terms of descriptions of how it had operated in the past, and then (c) to identify how it had moved from *b* to *a*. Questions to stimulate respondents' comments focused on these three objectives. Teachers interviewed ranged in their tenure and experiences at Dibert from one who had been there seventeen years to one who was new that year.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this method, data are reviewed and "unitized" — that is, the text of the interview transcriptions is cut into parts that represent information about a particular topic. The first piece of topical text is placed in a "stack." The next piece of text is compared to the first; if its focus is the same as the first, it is placed on that stack. If the focus is different, it starts a new stack indicating a new topic. All text units are reviewed and placed on stacks as their topics are compared.

After this review and analysis of the interview data, several things seemed clear: the entire faculty interacted with each other at a regularly scheduled time and place, spoke as one voice about their school and their role in it, shared a clear vision of what they wanted their school to be for children, participated in decision making, and practiced norms of critical inquiry regarding the effectiveness of their work and relationships with children. In combination, these factors contributed to continuous school improvement — this constituted the researchers' initial working hypothesis and contributed to their emerging grounded theory of school context and culture and its effect on schools' capacity to change.

Triangulated data, "seeing or hearing multiple instances from different sources" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 234), prevent acceptance of unverified "initial impressions" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 11). The triangulated Dibert data were highly convergent, and it appeared that the school culture at Dibert was one in which adults operated as a learning organization (Senge, 1990). In the teacher interviews, frequent references were made to the four principals who, over time, had contributed to the school's methods and operations.

The researchers' second hypothesis focused on the principals: a school's culture can be shaped and re-invented by its principals. Exploring this hypothesis contributed further to the theory. The question of interest became, How is a school's culture developed? The next step, then, was to conduct an in-depth interview with each of the principals to hear their individual accounts of the development of Dibert. The current (fourth) principal had already been interviewed. The previous three — now a potter, a national educational consultant, and an attorney — were located, and a visit with each was scheduled.

Again, the approach was open, allowing the principals to reflect on their experiences at Dibert and their actions and contributions. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcripts produced. Representative data relevant to their philosophy and actions were identified in the transcripts of the interviews, using the constant comparative method. This procedure guided the "sensemaking"

process (Murphy, in press). These data were cross-checked with those from the teacher interviews for validation.

Stories that described the tenure of each principal were developed. For some, *stories* as a "way to knowledge and understanding may not seem scholarly" (Seidman, 1991, p. xii), but "stories are a way of knowing" (p. 1). The stories were sent to the principals for "member checking," inviting their scrutiny of the information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and their comments and corrections. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, colleagues who knew the school from experience and researchers' colleagues who had been in the school and interacted with the school staff, were asked to critique the data and the analysis. This procedure of "peer debriefing" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by a disinterested but informed peer contributed to the credibility of the results.

After revisions that were based on all the feedback, a final step was to examine the story text and identify the actions made by the principals in the development of the "Dibert Difference." These actions were then organized to reflect factors and functions revealed in the literature that constitute a context supportive of school change.

The School as a Learning Community

As data collection and analysis led to the emergence of working hypotheses, a review of the findings of other researchers was conducted. The particular type of culture that exists at Dibert led the authors to investigate the literature discussing the concept of "learning communities" and the role of leaders in shaping the school's culture.

A New Paradigm

"Learning community" has become a popularly used term in educational literature, particularly with regard to school reform. The idea of a learning community is an adaptation of "learning organizations," described by Senge (1990) as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

Senge's concept of a learning organization is that it practices five disciplines: shared vision, mental models, team learning, personal mastery, and systems thinking. It is systems thinking that helps one to understand the "subtlest aspect of the learning organization — the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind — from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it" (Senge, 1990, p. 12).

This shift of mind that Senge describes may also be characterized as a paradigm shift, as conceptualized by Kuhn (1970). Kuhn (1970) defines a paradigm in two ways: "On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (p. 175). A paradigm also serves as a basis for the solution of problems. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that "our actions in the world . . . cannot occur without reference to those paradigms: 'As we think, so do we act' " (p. 15). A paradigm shift occurs when there is a profound change in the beliefs, values, and techniques that form the current reality (Gordon, 1992). In order for a paradigm shift to occur, the existing paradigm must "fail to solve important problems that it is intended to address" (Gordon, 1992, p. 63).

Gordon (1992) explains the process. The failure of the old paradigm to solve the problem at hand leads to a crisis for the community, followed by questioning of the old paradigm. Gradually more and more persons begin to question the old paradigm and debates over discarding it occur. The old paradigm is not rejected, however, until a new paradigm emerges. "The new paradigm may already be in existence or may develop gradually or rapidly in a direct response to the crisis. The new paradigm does not easily replace the old one. . . . [T]here is intense resistance from those still supporting the old one. The paradigm shift is completed when a preponderance of the community has rejected the old paradigm and embraced the new" (Gordon, 1992, p. 63).

Believing, and acting on the belief, that schooling is an interconnected web of activity that involves everyone in the school as a learner, not just the students, represents a new paradigm of schooling. "In a community of learners, everyone involved is a learner, including teachers and administrators. . . . When a school is a community of learners, the shared system of values and the common agenda of activities center on learning" (Kleine-Kracht, 1993, p. 393). Martel (1993) defines a learning community "as part of a new vision . . . an organism whose structure, processes, and outcomes are focused on integrating a set of internal and external organizations, institutions, and people whose energy is derived from the total commitment to the enhancement of mental performance of all of us as learners" (p. 22).

Kleine-Kracht (1993), however, believes that "the idea of the school as a community centered on *learning* is not new. The concept is readily evident in Dewey's philosophy of learning and teaching where teachers and students participate together in the process of learning and share experiences of learning. The shared work of learning holds the school together as a community and is the primary source of social control" (p. 392).

Sergiovanni (1992) states that "The idea of a school as a learning community suggests a kind of connectedness among members that resembles what is found in a family, a neighborhood, or some other closely knit group, where bonds tend to be familial or even sacred" (p. 47). Westheimer and Kahne (1993) view "community as a process marked by interaction and deliberation among individuals who share interests and commitment to common goals. . . . Meaningful interactions among members lead to a sense of shared responsibility

for both the process and its outcomes. Reflection is encouraged, and dissent is honored. Such communities grow out of shared experiences" (p. 325). Schools as learning communities provide norms that guide behavior and answer such questions as What are we doing? Why are we doing this? How might we do things better?

Kruse and Louis (1993) characterize a "school-based professional community" as one where teachers engage in reflective dialogue, where there is de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values. Kruse and Louis list several conditions that are necessary for the creation of strong professional communities: time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, teacher empowerment, and school autonomy. They also note that several pre-conditions are required: openness to improvement, trust and respect, a cognitive and skill base, and supportive leadership.

These characteristics and conditions parallel those that Boyd (1992b) found in a review of the literature regarding the factors of context that facilitate or impede change, particularly change that targets improvement of schools for at-risk students. Boyd divided these factors into two categories, the ecology and the culture. The ecology includes resources, physical arrangements, scheduling patterns, school size, demographic shifts, working conditions, and local, state, and federal policies. The culture was conceptualized as (1) attitudes and beliefs held by those in the school, as well as by the external community, (2) norms, and (3) relationships. The factors found to facilitate change were synthesized as seventeen indicators (Boyd, 1992a). In preparation for a training session, Boyd and Hord arranged the indicators as four functions of a context conducive to change (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four Functions and Related Indicators of a Context Conducive to Change

Reducing Isolation
- Schedules and structures that reduce isolation
- Policies that foster collaboration
- Policies that provide effective communication
- Collegial relationships among teachers
- A sense of community in the school

Increasing Staff Capacity
- Policies that provide greater autonomy
- Policies that provide staff development
- Availability of resources
- Norm of involvement in decision making

Providing a Caring, Productive Environment
- Positive teacher attitudes toward schooling, students, and change
- Students' heightened interest and engagement with learning
- Positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships
- Supportive community attitudes
- Parents and community members as partners and allies

Promoting Increased Quality
- Norm of continuous critical inquiry
- Norm of continuous improvement
- Widely shared vision or sense of purpose

As Senge (1990) and others suggest, learning and change are two sides of the same coin. Beckhard and Pritchard (1992) believe that "learning while doing" is "probably the most important single process in effective change" (p. 9). "Learning" is a word that has lost its meaning in many senses, according to Senge. "Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. . . . [A] learning organization is an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (Senge, 1990, p. 14). This learning process should be a process of learning while doing, according to Beckhard and Pritchard (1992).

One characteristic of a true learning organization is that the norms encourage innovation. Argyris and Schon (1987, cited in Beckhard and Pritchard) note that "organizational learning involves the detection and correction of errors" (p. 15). Because learning and change are so closely linked, it is proposed that a context conducive to change as described by the seventeen indicators above is also characteristic of a learning community.

Sergiovanni (1992) maintains that the norms of a school as a learning community may substitute for leadership because they can "provide teachers and others who work in schools with the kind of inspiration, meaning, and motivation that come from within. . . . There is less need for principals and superintendents to

motivate people from the outside by bartering psychological and physical need fulfillment in exchange for compliance" (p. 44).

The authors of this paper propose that a learning community performs four functions essential to change and school improvement (Table 1). A learning community reduces isolation, increases staff capacity, provides a caring, productive environment, and promotes increased quality. Leadership, however, is essential for the creation of a learning community. Beckhard and Pritchard (1992) note that "a learning mode only occurs when an organization's top leaders understand the process, see learning as something to be valued, and are prepared to personally commit themselves to it" (p. 14).

The Leaders' Role in Creating a Culture

"It is characteristic for any culture to regulate the behavior of its members by demanding conformity to standards acceptable to the community" (Prince, 1989, p. 4). The culture of a school is no less demanding. Sergiovanni (1992) notes that "the images of the learning community suggest a very different kind of leadership practice" (p. 46). Several writers have discussed what leaders might do to shape the culture of an organization or school. This section summarizes the findings of these writers regarding the influence that leaders exert in shaping culture and in the creation of learning communities.

From his study of business organizations, Schein (1989) suggests that there are both primary and secondary mechanisms for shaping the culture of an organization. Primary mechanisms include what the organization's leaders pay attention to, measure, and control; their reactions to critical events and crises within the organization; their role modeling, coaching, and teaching; the criteria they use to allocate rewards and status; and the criteria they use for recruiting, selecting, promoting, and isolating staff.

Secondary mechanisms used to shape the culture, according to Schein, include the organization's design and structure; organizational systems and procedures, design of the physical space, facades, and buildings; stories, legends, myths, and parables about important events and people; and formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds, and charters. Schein designates these as secondary mechanisms because, to have an effect, they must be consistent with the primary mechanisms.

Schein's findings in the corporate world have been confirmed by researchers studying school cultures. Principals who want to change school culture first seek to understand the existing system (Patterson, 1993; Deal & Peterson, 1990). They identify the norms, values, and beliefs that they want to reinforce, as well as those that they want to change. They may also use measures of climate or culture to gather information about the existing culture of the school (Mahaffy, 1988).

If the desired changes are dramatic, school leaders make an explicit commitment and communicate it to others (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Leaders strengthen the desired school culture by engaging in a process with the entire staff to clarify and

prioritize a set of shared goals for school improvement initiatives (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Leaders begin by talking about the importance of developing a common goal or vision in faculty meetings, informal discussions, and other appropriate formats. The development of norms of collegiality and collaboration is given priority as part of the school's vision (Mahaffy, 1988).

One very important aspect of the school culture is the informal network that controls communication in the school. School leaders can reveal this network by noting who talks and writes to whom, when, why, and what response they get (Deal, 1985). Constant communication and questioning of current practice in light of how to improve the school is used to establish a norm of continuous improvement (Staessens, 1991). Informal messages communicated during personal meetings between the leader and staff members are quite powerful as well (Schein, 1989). Sergiovanni (1992) reports that it is this informal network that provides peer pressure to support new norms.

By consistently modeling, coaching, attending to detail, observing ceremonies, rituals, and traditions, and telling stories that identify heroes and heroines who support the school's mission, school leaders reinforce the core values and norms of the school (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Staessens, 1991). Principals in Leithwood and Jantzi's study (1990) engaged in direct and frequent communication about the desired cultural norms. They used interpersonal contact for the purposes of visiting, informing, persuading, negotiating, writing, discussing, and counseling with teachers in order to communicate the values of the culture. What principals give attention to, talk about, and reinforce or support, as they tour their buildings or at school activities, influences teachers' attitudes and behaviors (Peterson, 1988). "The norming behavior of the principal . . . set a standard for respect of others in the school" (Dickerson, 1992, p. 9). In addition, the principal articulated the vision for the school through his or her own modeling.

Peterson (1988) suggests that there are several actions that principals take to promote a particular culture in their schools, with their greatest influence lying in their power to recruit, select, promote, and demote staff members. School leaders who shape culture recruit teachers and staff who share their view of the mission of the school and whose values and beliefs are consistent with those being established (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) found that in addition to hiring teachers who have an established commitment to the school's purposes, principals also give teachers the option to transfer to other schools if they choose not to devote themselves to those purposes. And by hiring and retaining teachers who highly value experimentation in their classroom, principals can create an atmosphere conducive to innovation (Peterson, 1988).

The establishment of collaborative decision-making procedures has been found to contribute to goal clarification (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). School leadership teams are established and invite participation from other faculty in order to use the process as a consensus-building activity (Mahaffy, 1988). Staessens (1991) found that when the leader establishes staff meetings, systematic discussions

with teacher colleagues, a steering committee, and various working groups, a support network for collaboration is formed.

Leaders who shape the school's culture provide structures to enable professional exchange among teachers by designating time and space for such collaboration (Staessens, 1991). By creating opportunities for interaction among teachers — such as common planning time, staff retreats, staff presenting workshops to other staff, teachers visiting other teachers' classes, and working committees assigned to specific tasks — school leaders reduce teacher isolation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). The allocation of resources and visibility of school improvement on meeting agendas are bureaucratic structures that may be used to support cultural change (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Mahaffy, 1988). In a case study of one secondary school's restructuring effort, Dickerson (1992) found that such actions as changing the schedule from six 55-minute classes each day to eight 90-minute classes over two days and reducing student-teacher ratios influenced other aspects of the school.

Staff development may be used to facilitate the transition from isolation and independence to collaboration and interdependence by acknowledging that teachers can learn from colleagues (Mahaffy, 1988). In Leithwood and Jantzi's study (1990), principals modeled the importance of staff development by personally providing workshops, assisting teachers in their classrooms, attending inservice sessions with staff, informing staff of inservice opportunities and encouraging participation, and sharing information from conferences or workshops. Delegating power to staff was also viewed as an opportunity for teachers to learn. Regular faculty meetings that focus on teaching and learning, access to research information by the leadership team, and working with the staff to develop a colleague coaching system in the school are three techniques for providing staff development (Mahaffy, 1988). Staff development presented by staff members for one another was encouraged.

In addition to providing development opportunities for the staff, principals who shape the school's culture attend to their own development. They stay abreast of innovations and promote inservice programs and seminars that sensitize the staff to the importance of such innovations, thus shaping the culture (Peterson, 1988). Staessens (1991) described leaders of a culture for change as being well informed and well read. They make sure that help or answers are found for problems encountered by teachers. Coaching the staff about what is acceptable practice as they are engaged in their work is another tool used to shape the culture (Schein, 1989).

Another strategy noted by researchers is that principals who create a culture for change in their schools confront resistance, rather than avoiding or withdrawing from it. They use conflicts as opportunities to promote interaction and discussion about the vision of the school (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Staessens, 1991). Further, principals may provide staff development on conflict resolution and other team-building skills (Mahaffy, 1988).

These principals recognize and celebrate successes (both large and small) as often as possible (Deal & Peterson, 1990). To celebrate and publicly recognize the work of staff and students that contributed to school improvement efforts, principals in Leithwood and Jantzi's study (1990) wrote individual notes to staff expressing appreciation for special or personal efforts. Recognition and celebration of faculty accomplishments is provided at individual, group, and whole-staff levels (Mahaffy, 1988). Principals also reward teachers' independent efforts at implementation by selecting such teachers for special or desirable assignments or by helping them get funding for their projects, large or small (Peterson, 1988). Consistently linking rewards with the behavior that leaders want staff to adopt signals in a powerful way what is valued (Schein, 1989).

By "being where the action is," principals gain many opportunities to shape the culture in their schools (Peterson, 1988). Keeping track of what's going on and regularly re-evaluating the extent to which students, teachers, parents, and the community share a vision of the school's mission and the degree to which cultural patterns are mutually reinforcing and supportive of that mission are important tasks for principals who seek to shape the culture (Deal & Peterson, 1990). According to Mahaffy (1988), school leaders should be sure they are aware of all the activity going on in the school in order to respond to the needs of the staff.

A school's culture is shaped by an accumulation of hundreds of actions — no single one is seen as critical. In combination, however, they profoundly affect the school's context for change (Peterson, 1988). The principal's role in shaping school culture is abundantly described above. What is less well known is how a principal develops a *learning community culture* consistent with the seventeen indicators noted in Table 1. Through the leadership of four principals, a learning community was created at Dibert Elementary School. The process of this evolution and specifically how these principals contributed to it are described in the following sections.

Historically Speaking

The school facility was built in 1923. The structure, designed in the boxlike style of the day, was carefully built, with quality features, such as Louisiana cypress-wood window frames that still endure today (Elizabeth Rack, former member, New Orleans School Board, personal communication, December 1993). In the beginning, the school's mostly Anglo-American elementary students (K–6 grades) were sent to school by mothers who remained in the home and by fathers who were white- and blue-collar workers of generally stable large and small businesses and industrial employers. Life seemed simple, straightforward, and reasonably uncomplicated — as was the school.

A person who was a student at the school from 1951 to 1955 (Barbara Prosser, personal communication, 1992) recalls a well-ordered, pleasant environment with "a heavy emphasis on basic skills but with enrichment activities as well." Students went on field trips to the city's symphony youth performances and to the museum in City Park, where an exhibit on Leonardo da Vinci is still remembered. They also toured a large canning factory located near the school.

Each school day started with a general assembly that included the pledge of allegiance to the flag and announcements by the principal. A variety of intramural sports, such as softball, were available to students. Regularly scheduled movies were shown in an auditorium upstairs. Some students performed in choral singing groups or played musical instruments. An outdoor school-wide festival occurred in May, and for it children wore costumes and sang and danced.

Two special classes served students who had visual or hearing problems. At times these students attended regular classes.

There was considerable parent interest in supporting the school. Parents, and children too, contributed work hours, for instance, in refinishing student desks at the end of the school year. Students and their families seemed to have a sense of ownership in the school. Years later, former students who had gone to the school during this early-fifties period realized that several of their classmates had moved on to become teachers — suggesting that the school exerted a positive influence

A Crisis Opportunity

As has happened in many urban neighborhoods, the population of the elementary school dwindled as families grew older and residents moved to the suburban fringes of the city. In the early seventies, the school also became more bureaucratic, more rigidly structured, and more hierarchically dominated by its single administrator as the sole decisionmaker. Because of the ever-decreasing student population, the school board discussed closing the school, and this crisis stimulated significant action by a few tenacious white and black parents who didn't want to lose their school; they developed a coalition of interested parents who initiated dialogue with the board to keep the school open. As a result, a decision to maintain the school as a magnet school was made.

With the new concept of magnet school came new administrators and the challenge to generate sufficient student enrollment to stay open. As the community continued to change and as enrollment grew, the student population changed from mostly Anglo-American (85-90%) to a mixed population. In 1986 there was a 50-50 racial balance of African-Americans and Anglo-Americans, and the school tries to maintain this ratio. Currently, there is an increasing number of Hispanic students, and a small number of Asians, as the school is becoming increasingly multicultural.

Children First

Administrative leadership has had a significant impact on the development of Dibert. From the beginning of Dibert's re-creation, it wasn't just the administrators who demonstrated leadership. "It was the whole feeling that we could make a difference by being positive, and opening up to each other," the faculty reported, "getting away from locked-in traditions" — in current terms, "making a paradigm shift." The teachers, administrators, and school

community worked to re-create the school as a place where children are valued, respected, and cared for.

The staff, teachers, administrators, and school community sought to re-invent the school based on "children first." The principal led a search for additional teachers to work in an open-classroom environment, with students using the "workshop way" (in which the classroom is organized around learning centers and children pursue tasks independently to a large extent). The work of the staff school-wide centered on brainstorming and problem solving to address issues and concerns that they identified. Communication structures were developed, and caring among teachers and children was emphasized.

A heightened level of professionalism and efficacy evolved among the staff, in addition to their sense of accountability for the children's development — intellectually, socially, ethically, physically. Faculty Study and Morning Meeting were designed as part of the infrastructure of the school — and as a nerve center and conduit for its heartbeat. A strong, confident staff with trust in each other and in children has been nurtured by their shared visions. They are, one and all, a family as they continue to shape their school for children. But how has the school become what it is?

The Dibert Difference: A School's Development

A basic tenet of this school's faculty is reflected by one of the staff, "We feel we can trust children to enjoy learning that doesn't have to be defined in one best system. And that joy and laughter and play are all serious business in the elementary school. And so we started . . ."

The First Principal of the New Dibert: Lucy's Legacy
June 1975 – August 1976

"I think one of the factors for Dibert was that it really and truly was at the end of the rope . . . the school was going to be taken away from them." Fearful that the school might be closed, two parents made an appointment and came to Lucianne Carmichael's office to ask for advice. Lucianne was the principal of another school that the district had closed and then reopened as a magnet school. She suggested creating a magnet school at Dibert. "It would require a really massive difference in the educational offering if it were to be viable." Lucianne also favored a child-centered approach, and she brought this idea to the parents. "First and foremost is what is going to most facilitate the child's own learning processes and validate the child."

Lucianne told the parents she would support them, and she suggested they go to the district superintendent. Lucianne notes that at that time superintendents were secure in their positions. She believes that this confidence allowed them to trust their staffs and their ideas. The other factor she credits for their granting support was the parents. "I think anybody dealing with them would sense that these ladies weren't going to go away easily." The assistant superintendent who

met with the parents "was amenable to the idea; he did not tell them 'no it was impossible.' "

The superintendent, however, agreed to support the idea only if Carmichael would lead the effort. She agreed, with conditions: she would have assistance (since she would spend part of her time at Dibert and also remain as principal in her current school assignment); extensive staff development would be provided for the teachers; and only teachers committed to the concept would remain on the staff. "I never realized until recently how much the structure of the institution prevents the human beings within it, no matter how well intentioned they are, no matter how hardworking they are, or how desperate they are, from making changes." With her conditions approved, Lucianne agreed to guide the change effort.

The changes at Dibert began with the idea that "a true child-centered approach is really a person-centered approach . . . [b]ecause teachers can't honor children until they have that clear sense within themselves." One part of this person-centered approach was giving staff the option of transferring to another school if they did not want to be part of the new program. "Again, it's the matter of honoring the adult before you can honor the children. We had to honor that staff." Any new staff who came to the school to replace those who chose to leave were to be selected by Lucianne. This was quite unusual at that time. In fact, Lucianne reports, "I'm sure I was the first principal that ever interviewed teachers [in the district]. It was a battle to achieve that, but [the district] agreed to that."

Originally, Lucianne wanted a summer-long training program for the teachers, but money was available for only one week. She interviewed and selected some teachers. With some new materials and one week of training with Marian Brooks of City College, New York, they began to re-create the school. "We ungraded the school and set up family grouping right in the beginning. We had quite a few new, wonderful materials. I spent a long, long time with the teachers. And somehow we started. We started meeting in the basement. And I was there every morning." This was the birth of Morning Meeting. The ungraded classrooms with children of several ages together formed the family groupings. Lucianne articulated the philosophy underlying this arrangement. "Children learn by copying other children more than from any other source. We know that from raising our own children. . . . In schools we don't use that because we think that children are going to learn (a) out of the book and (b) from the teacher. They learn from other kids and by doing it themselves."

Another part of Lucianne's philosophy was expressed in the continuous opportunities provided to children to develop and demonstrate artistic creativity. Whether through music, drama, dance, or the visual arts, children could share themselves and their richly divergent culture and backgrounds. In this way, children were honored for their special differences that collectively contributed to Dibert, their "rainbow school." This was congruent with Lucianne's own experiences as an artist — a potter.

Once the school had opened, Lucianne went to the district for the assistance she had been promised and an assistant was hired to be at the school full time. "So Clif St. Germain became my assistant, but actually he was the principal at Dibert. . . . He and I talked every day. Every day during the first year, and almost every day during the second year. I went there for faculty meetings always, and parent meetings."

"Until thinking changes, nothing will change. . . . My total investment of time or money or anything was always in the staff. Before I would buy any kind of equipment or spend money on the building, the money would first be spent on opportunities for the teachers or time for teachers, for all of us. I learned from the beginning that the most important resource that we had was the staff. No amount of money was too much to invest in them."

Lucianne arranged for and went with Clif and several teachers to visit schools in England that were using the child-centered approach. "It's just like any kind of learning. To read about it falls short; if you go and experience something you can really know what it is we are talking about. I always felt for myself and the other teachers that we had to get into other schools. We had to really go and see and experience and do. . . . So every penny that I could get for teachers or me to travel, we did."

"We have to feed ourselves, invest in ourselves, teach ourselves; we have to be the first learners. Unless the teachers are the primary learners in that building, the children don't learn much. Teachers have to have time to do that; they have to have support."

Time was another resource Lucianne provided for the staff and their development. Because the district did not provide any more paid time, the staff began to rethink the time that they already had available. They realized that time was "a very malleable resource." The staff decided that one way to rearrange time was to teach longer four days of the week and close the school early on Thursdays. The time gained on that day was used for teachers to meet together, but never for regular faculty meetings. "The underlying idea was always it was for some kind of self-development process." To that end, the teachers "were bombarded from the first, surrounded as much as possible with good reading, with good materials that we worked on together." Thus Faculty Study began.

"Another factor [was that the teachers] were pretty clear with the idea of what the school was. . . . I continuously wrote notes and letters to teachers. I went in classrooms; I would come out and write notes supporting every positive thing that I saw. . . . In my job as principal, the teachers were my students in a sense, and I had to do with them everything that I wanted them to do with the students. I had to trust them, and honor them, and support them, and inspire them, and nurture them, and reinforce the good things that I saw them doing. When they began to experience that, I think they began to have more vision and ability to have things like that happening in their classroom. . . . When that starts in the teacher's mind, it doesn't end. It snowballs."

The Second Principal, Clif: Passing the Potter's Torch
August 1975-1976, Administrative Assistant; September 1976–1980, Principal

The faculty remember Clif St. Germain as a twenty-seven-year-old, recently credentialed guidance counselor who became assistant principal at Dibert. Later, he would become principal. "Lucianne was the spirit of the school and the embodiment of tenacity and focus on beauty," he said of his mentor. If she was the spirit, he was the heart, all the old-timers agree, as he set out to develop a happy place where children could learn.

The advertisement had been for someone who could put the school in order. The faculty was divided: some were young and energetic and wanted to create a sense of community and were willing to challenge the status quo; others appeared at work with no energy at all except for dissension. There were serious student discipline problems from "kids who were deciding they were going to run the whole school. . . . My initial job was to do discipline and bring the school to a place where the vision of curriculum and instruction could be implemented."

Clif kept a journal, beginning with the first meeting at Dibert School, that recorded all the problems, faced daily in year one: too many kids in the classrooms, not enough books, no release time for planning, too much rough kids' play, not enough consistency in discipline. He and the staff carefully identified what was there, in order to fashion an action plan to get from "where we were to where we dreamed we wanted to be collectively."

The faculty already existed when he got there, and it included a few people "I wondered if I could work with." The faculty had the option to decide if they wanted to stay at Dibert, now a magnet school, and sign on as part of the program and its development — or to go elsewhere. Some people decided they didn't want to go but they didn't want to stay either.

But there was generally a collective consciousness and an agreement to address the issues. They met on Thursday afternoons to work on the problems. "I spent a lot of time identifying how they were hurting — and they were. I thought if I could resolve some of the problems they were having to deal with, they would be willing to come with me to a new vision of schooling." How to get people to share a new mind-set? Every time he and the staff talked about the school, it was within the framework of "How do we create a happy place where children learn?" It started with building a culture, using the first two or three years of energy to create an identifiable vision that could be articulated in terms of culture, curriculum, and kids.

"We used discipline, out of necessity, as a place to start." The discipline policy was simple: *Be Kind and Share*. When Clif dealt with kids and their discipline problems, it was within a framework of kindness. "Is that kind, the way you punched him in the chops?" He would elaborate kindness with the kids until "they were blue in the face." He and the faculty used Glasser's ten steps of discipline, and at Thursday meetings they focused on understanding Glasser better and elaborated the implications of that for them and for the children.

"I would watch the bus as it approached school. On the bus the kids appeared happy and relatively free of discipline problems. In five steps after leaving the bus, they became sullen. Our question was how can we communicate to kids we want them to be here and that this is a place that's going to be special — that they can say they go to school at this wonderful place." But in five steps they came to a dingy, smelly place that wasn't inviting physically and "smelled like it was angry." So they cleaned up the physical facility and "put flowers, music and metaphor and poetry and song into the walls." They painted a rainbow on the front of the school.

To no one's surprise, a district administrator appeared to inquire who had requested and received permission to "paint this rainbow on the front of the school." After a brief conversation, the district office representative walked back to his car shaking his head — district office didn't share what the staff was trying to do in this place. St. Germain noted, "At that time in the school system you got points if you had your paperwork in on time. They thoroughly reprimanded me, and I am still considering where I fit into the system."

Because Dibert was an open enrollment school, the challenge to the staff was to create programs and attract families in the community to the public school. They went out into the community to tell people, "We are building a good school and we need you to be a part of the public schools in this area and join us." A private school in the area competed with Dibert for pupils, to the point of disseminating inaccurate information about Dibert. "So I had to confront the school's administrator about the overzealous parents [there]. I suggested that 'you help them to be truthful' or I will tell it in the newspaper."

These issues were not as complex or as difficult as the staff's efforts to fashion a belief system that could be articulated in terms of teaching. That took years and was the conversation for the whole length of time that St. Germain was at the school. The vision was "somewhere outside us and we all held that if we worked hard, the clouds would open and we could see it — however, the vision was bigger than us and it still is."

St. Germain was asked what advice he would give, in retrospect, to others who wish to re-invent and found a school on new assumptions. He said, first, know yourself and identify your strengths related to being an administrator in the school; find out what gives you energy and never let that go. "Whenever things get too harried or difficult, then you go into that energy space to rejuvenate yourself. The principalship is a lonely place, so if you know yourself and who you are in terms of the school, and how to 'fill the tank every once in a while,' you don't run the risk of crashing into the rocks."

Second, he said, know that time will always be difficult in any process and accept that. Third, "trust that teachers know best about teaching." That is a key, so one should trust them and listen to them and "when they bellow at you, know that they are coming from wanting to have a good school." It takes four or five years just to work on trust; the level of trust the teachers had "for me after one year was

limited. I had to demonstrate that I would be there and they had to show they would be there in the difficult times. We built trust over the years. This is a personal process that goes on with a faculty."

In years four and five, St. Germain reported, they wanted to have a more academic school, but "we knew we couldn't get to that until we met the culture needs. The school was special in that Lucianne had an idea of what the school needed to be, so she was on one side saying, 'be innovative,' and the school was on the other side saying, 'traditional.' And we were trying to pick where we were in it." The school was defining what the school should be about and developing its belief system. Every Thursday they talked about how to operate the school and how to work with kids. Here was a group of people who came together and worked to try to have a good school, so that "our being here is going to amount to something in the lives of these kids. And they are going to amount to something in our lives because they are going to teach us something."

"I was not successful in getting the district to support us. I was unsuccessful in bringing in the external resources that I wanted in the school. We weren't as organized as I would have us to be. But in terms of what I set out to do at Dibert, I feel successful." He noted that the relationship he had with the school and faculty was the way he saw the universe. That is, "We all have a purpose and when the purpose is fulfilled, it's time to leave." Once his purpose had been accomplished, he had to move on; "I was now treading water." He wanted to be sure that the new principal would be one who believed strongly in something and would take the school in a strong direction. He had coffee with Nancy Picard and asked her, "Can you do this?" And she looked at him and said, "Can I do it, like who do you think you are, I am going to do it better than you ever did."

The Third Principal: Now It's Nancy
January 1981–May 1985

She had been looking for a school setting consistent with her beliefs, a place that appreciated the same things she appreciated — that place was Dibert. "Lucianne and Clif were the creators; they got it started, but it needed a lot to complete it." Nancy Picard's primary goal "was empowerment; I believed that it was the principal's job to empower teachers, students, and parents both as a means for creating a quality school and as an end in itself." This empowerment meant removing barriers and expanding what had been started under Lucianne and Clif. "I put something of an academic focus on and tried to model this at morning meeting. I felt like my job was to empower people around me. I did that for my teachers and my kids but I didn't have anybody doing that for me. . . . I didn't get support or backup that I needed from the district or the state."

Nancy's strategies to empower teachers included communicating to teachers that they had the power to set goals and that the school as a community would support them in accomplishing those goals. Nancy demonstrated appreciation for teacher's efforts, as part of the community. She also held them responsible for accomplishing the goals. To make teachers feel appreciated and valued, and to know that they were important, Nancy encouraged such special events as a

parent-sponsored potluck lunch for teachers on the first day of school. "I wanted teachers and others to understand that teachers here were special, as we made sure the kids knew they were special. You'd hear kids say, 'We don't do that at Dibert.' I wanted teachers to say with pride that, 'We do this at Dibert; I teach at Dibert.' "

"We had a contest and redid our school T-shirts, using a kindergartner's design to increase school spirit and visibility." A kindergarten coffee was initiated, where Picard would go and speak to different parent groups and invite them to the school for a tour given by Dibert parents. It was an effort at public relations, and "it gave the teachers a chance to show off." All these activities were directed toward the goal of increasing teachers' self-esteem.

Nancy takes pride in the Arts Connection program as an example of the way a sense of empowerment developed among teachers at Dibert. Teachers were interested in writing a proposal to get this program to provide more opportunities for children in the visual arts. "The fact that teachers would work on their own to seek an arts grant and then plan and execute the program was a testament to the accomplishment of my personal goal at the school, which was not simply to establish an arts program but to establish an atmosphere and a mind-set that would encourage and enable others in the school to establish a program as well. . . . All I did was sign my name."

Another goal Nancy set about accomplishing was that of removing administrative procedures that interrupted teachers' instructional activities. "My message to teachers was, 'You are professionals. I value you for your work with students. I don't want you to have to spend any more energy on other tasks than necessary. I will not dump on you work which we can accomplish in the office unless absolutely necessary.' "

Her efforts to improve the processes included involving parents, limiting non-instructional tasks required of teachers, and providing structures for both decision making and teacher professional development. During Nancy's tenure, parents contributed time and took responsibility for projects at the school, thus freeing teachers to teach.

One of the first things she did was survey the parents to solicit their suggestions, comments, concerns. This was done in concert with the management team that she started. The lower- and upper-grade chairpersons, special education chairperson, a union representative, two parents, and a community person constituted the first team. A Tulane professor of education who had children in the city's public schools was part of the team and made a significant contribution.

The management team idea was designed as one way to reserve Faculty Study for teachers' professional development needs rather than administrative concerns. This structure reinforced "the concept of the teacher as a professional educator as opposed to the teacher as baby-sitter or paper-pusher." Since the management team provided the time and means for making decisions about how the school would run, Faculty Study time did not have to be used for this purpose. The team

represented the teachers and was a smaller body of people that would be more efficient in soliciting information and making decisions that their colleagues could support.

Nancy encouraged anything that would help teachers get rid of things that took their time and detracted from teaching. She takes some credit for the computerization of Form 10, the daily attendance report required by the district. She developed a weekly faculty bulletin to eliminate administrative items that took time in faculty meeting. In addition, Nancy included celebrations and praises for kids and teachers who were doing those kinds of things she liked to see happen, making sure that over time she mentioned something about each teacher. The bulletin cut down on administrivia and highlighted activities she wanted to foster in the school.

To achieve part of her goal of removing interruptions of teachers' instructional time, Nancy also changed the process for lunch money collection. The faculty credited her with eliminating this abomination, but she credited parents who took over the chore. Thus a step was taken toward Nancy's goal of empowering parents as well as teachers. Improving the parents' bulletin also helped to involve parents. The bulletin was upgraded with pictures and a logo, nicely printed and mailed out to parents, local businesses, and to community people monthly.

Under Nancy's administration, a new report card was designed that both was administratively easy to deal with and reflected the kinds of things that the school was trying to do with the students. Because report cards are a communication device between the school and the parents that "every parent reads," she focused attention on the content of every child's report card, making comments to model the type of comments she felt teachers should include. She also made report card comments "the focus of my weekly bulletin to teachers. I compared positive comments with negative ones, and generally set standards for the way the cards should be completed. I included a handout with suggested ways of communicating difficult messages to parents in a positive manner." The results of these changes were "very positive."

Second, the form of the report card was changed to prevent duplication of effort by teachers in recording grades on permanent records and to more "adequately reflect the skills that were being taught at each level." Nancy did not make these changes alone, however. Teachers were highly involved in the process through "many lengthy and loud discussions of curriculum, child development, grade levels, etc. Eventually we produced a new report card that reflected our curriculum, our expectations for our children, and it was easier to complete in the bargain."

Another idea put into practice had to do with gathering information about junior high schools. Different junior high principals came to parent meetings and spoke about their schools. The Dibert student council conducted these presentations to inform Dibert parents and students about grades and other requirements of the various schools. "I wanted students to know they had a choice about what they

could do with their lives, the direction they could take, the schools they could choose, etc."

Picard's tenure at Dibert ended after she was injured while attending a picnic with the Dibert students and faculty. This set up another transition period and began the selection process for a new administrator for the school.

The Fourth and Current Principal: Wiley's Way
Fall 1985–Present

"The two principals who preceded me had a real commitment to share decision making and move teachers toward ownership in what was going on in the school, so when I came it was clearly understood when I interviewed for the position that was the way business was done at Dibert." He had, as always, the responsibilities of the principal, but "there have been few occasions when the management team and teachers moved toward a decision I didn't support." When serious decisions are to be made, they are made through the team, with teachers and parents involved. Also included on the management team is the school's student council president, who has generally added a refreshing perspective.

The school's ranking teacher filled in after Nancy's injury. The school had a preference that this teacher step into the principalship, but she did not have the appropriate credentials as established by district policy. Thus, Wiley came as an acting principal, not knowing when or if Nancy would return. During this period there was some faculty and parent anger in the school, not only about the trauma of Nancy's injury but also about the district's denial of an exception in the principal-selection process. Faculty felt that "Dibert is different and we do things our own way; we pilot new ideas and this should be one of them." They did not have a problem with Wiley but with the system. In addition to this controversy, there was some concern about Wiley's having come from an assistant principal position at a middle school, and they wondered, "Is he going to try to come in and change everything?"

Wiley came with the attitude that he would maintain things and, if possible, bring new ideas into the school. He did make some changes in the way money was handled and other administrative procedures, for which "we could get into a whole lot of trouble if we didn't follow established guidelines." But the management team was "my guide as well as my colleagues, and that is the beauty of having that kind of background, experience, knowledge, leadership and ownership within a school" in such a transition period. "If you are not intimidated by that, then you put your faith in people you work with, and you can get oriented very quickly and get a great deal accomplished, and not feel lost as many new principals do when they come in." Typically there is not a support group for new principals, but "the management team was my support group."

"One of the things my predecessor was very good at but that is a weak area of mine was a weekly *Dibert Day to Day* bulletin for teachers." Wiley does a *Dibert Update* as needed — it could be once a week, twice a week, or even once a month. Because

of the Thursday meeting time, which is still scheduled, "we have a lot of opportunity for talk and discussion."

One of the things Wiley and the faculty do is look at California Achievement Test (CAT) data to identify areas of non-mastery and partial mastery. Areas that have warranted school-wide focus are reading vocabulary skills and reading for content. "One of our goals is to move all our kids up, but we have looked at the kids in the bottom quartile and have been successful in moving them into the second quartile." Whole-language instruction has been the instructional method of choice for the faculty, who group and regroup within the classroom to address individual students' strengths and weaknesses.

When a teachers' strike led to considerable tension across the faculty, it was resolved through circle table discussion that was beneficial to both Wiley and the faculty. "We sat and talked and leveled with each other about how we were feeling about what was going on. It was hard for everyone to deal with . . . although people feel like they can give me feedback in a group setting, or individually." Wiley solicits feedback on some occasions, but at other times "the faculty pulls me into discussion, saying, We need to talk to you about these things." At other times he does the pulling when he gets mixed messages from a number of people. In such instances they have a series of meetings where they talk about concerns, and they are "very blunt and deal with emotional kinds of things where people have a hard time saying what they are really feeling . . . but we work our way through it."

The group employs this kind of catharsis on a regular basis, sometimes with a facilitator. "Where we've made the greatest progress is sitting down as a faculty with an agenda, laying our cards on the table, and giving each other explanations about why and how things happen . . . we need more time to do this unstructured type of discussion. . . . It's like a family where people's feelings get hurt and where animosities and concerns build up, and you need a vehicle to let some of that out and talk about it and get it out on the table as much as you can. Time is always a factor, always so hard to deal with."

Faculty members address each other and Wiley by first names. They view themselves as a family and "if you want to perpetuate a feeling of family, then everybody calls everybody by their first name and I have always been very comfortable with that," Wiley states. They do, of course, address each other in classrooms as "Mr." or "Mrs.," but it's not unusual for first names to be used before children, "and the kids don't blink an eye because what we are doing is modeling behavior for the kids and it's perfectly natural for two adults to call each other by their first name."

Another important aspect of Dibert is the use of Morning Meeting to set the family tone and start the day together. It's a special time, with all the children sitting on the basement floor, a time for sharing and honoring kids. "We have one of the best audiences you will ever find 'cause we practice it every day. The kids have learned how to focus and how to listen, as kids come up to read a poem they have written. This time of year first-graders are finishing their first reader, so they

read a bit to us . . . if they go on a field trip, kids will come up and talk about it . . . they report on projects . . . the kindergartners came yesterday with hand puppets they had made and sang a song, so everyone got to clap for the kindergartners."

Wiley and the faculty have been interested in the research study being conducted of their school as a means of documenting the school's development. "It is real important to us to have an impartial researcher come in and help us understand what it is that we have done to get where we are. . . . It has to do with our self-esteem, morale in keeping ourselves going and being proud of who we are. . . . We really do think we are special and different and we want that to be documented. . . . Further, we want to continue to keep ourselves focused on where we need to be going. . . . The kinds of information you can give us about where we are will help us in formulating goals and setting priorities. . . . It's nice to have someone who can see the forest for the trees and give us some insight into where we are so that will help us decide where we want to go."

A reflection from a former Dibert staff person expresses the idea similarly. "A belief of mine is that if you are not being born, you are dying; you must re-create life or it is going to leave you. The faculty of Dibert needs to be challenged to create a new tomorrow for themselves. They are unhappy with a sort of idealized impression of what the past was and don't remember how miserable some of those days were. They lean back into the past and say, 'Boy, we used to be this.' We really weren't that; we were chasing every day, with an unbelievable amount of tenacity, toward an evolving vision of where to go."

Where they've been going is toward the use of technology and a focus on curriculum. Teachers report that Wiley has brought these emphases to the school. His area of specialization and preparation is in curriculum, and his tenure as middle school assistant principal at a school that received some of the Dibert students shaped his concerns that students be ready to matriculate to middle school.

In May 1992, the staff identified two goals for their attention in the subsequent school year: (1) implementing the Chapter 1 proposal to which they had all contributed (and which included the acquisition of a substantial number of computers and software for use by Chapter 1 students and all others), and (2) exploring and adopting a curriculum to which they could all subscribe. No one can remember exactly when the staff began thinking they needed a consistent curriculum they could all use. They expressed a concern that perhaps not every child was receiving an adequate and appropriate set of learning opportunities; thus they saw a "need to coordinate our curriculum."

They had tried in an earlier year to develop a math curriculum "from scratch," had found it to be a massive job, and wondered how strong it was. Therefore, they were interested in searching for a curriculum they could adopt. They hoped to find a core curriculum that would foster their vision of multiculturalism: "The curriculum is a way to get our vision strengthened. . . . The school has always been diverse and we want to perpetuate that."

At an Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) national conference, one of the teachers learned about a curriculum, obtained materials, shared it with Wiley and the management team, and was learning about it. Wiley reported that early concerns about this curriculum focused on its less-than-ideal sensitivity to their vision of multicultural issues.

Wiley and this key teacher met several times to plan how to share information with the staff and support them in the exploration and curriculum decision-making process. An initial activity was to revisit the school's mission and reiterate its operating principles, and then look at the curriculum in light of the school's mission and principles. Wiley led the staff in reviewing their vision statement and in generating their ideas and beliefs about how that "played out" in the school and the classrooms. He summarized these ideas and prepared them for distribution later.

Meanwhile, he and the key teacher copied and distributed curriculum materials for the faculty's study. These two people were identified by everyone as the leading facilitators of the effort. They met in individual, and small- and large-group informal conversations with faculty to consider the curriculum and their use of it, with Wiley cautioning them to take time before committing to the curriculum or before becoming too frustrated.

Guided by Wiley and a second teacher facilitator, the faculty met to do a force-field analysis of the benefits and disadvantages of the curriculum in relationship to their vision for the school. They met again to work with the curriculum and plan a thematic unit "so teachers could get their feet wet and get a real sense of how the curriculum would work, the materials needed to start, and areas of need for inservice." They also planned how to use a consultant (a teacher in another state who had used the curriculum). Wiley submitted a proposal for ten days of June inservice to do detailed work with the curriculum.

He encouraged staff to go to a national conference focusing on the curriculum, its users, and adaptations made by schools. Sixteen teachers and Wiley flew to the two-day out-of-state conference at their own expense to attend general sessions and breakout sessions related to their teaching assignments. Twice daily Wiley gathered them around the pool to discuss their learnings and how to share them with their colleagues at home. The "conference-goers" found their experience so rewarding that they suggested the whole faculty attend a conference together as part of their learning and development activities the next year.

At various times in the curriculum search process Wiley was seen by various observers as "pushing" and at other times as showing patience and reassuring the staff that he was not unequivocally "for" this curriculum. At one point, in some discouragement and uneasiness, he asked, "Do you really want to do this?" "Yes," they said, "it's just that it's going to be a lot of work and we all need to commit to it." They did.

Researchers' Reflections

A review of the sources of information available here — principals' interviews, interviews with teachers and other school and community persons (including the university professor discussed earlier), information from other professional colleagues related to Dibert, and written documents and artifacts — brings to light a few more observations, comments, and lessons learned that should be noted.

1. A crisis precipitated an opportunity, and a paradigm shift resulted. In following the steps outlined by Kuhn (1970), we can identify the stages:

   The model upon which the school was operating did not succeed in holding sufficient pupil attendance, and the school was threatened with closure.

   A few energetic parents explored options. They talked with each other. They talked with Lucianne to get her advice. They met with the school board to request a reprieve and a chance to develop a new paradigm. They developed a core group of parents for action.

   The new paradigm was introduced, but many (teachers) held on to the old — they didn't want to leave Dibert, but they didn't want to embrace the new model either.

   With a great deal of struggle and tenacity, the early administrators clung to a vision, to hopes, and to the few believers.

   In time the chorus changed its tune, and everyone began to sing from the same page, to the same melody — in harmony. The new paradigm was accepted, respected, and valued.

   A paradigm shift had occurred.

2. This school initially was not "into" school improvement. It was focused on "regeneration," a paradigm shift (Robert Wimpelberg, personal communication, 1992) — a rebirth or reformulation of its purpose and procedures — and had been forced into it by events and economic and sociological movements of the day.

3. Although the community connections were not abundantly articulated, it appears the school did have its roots in the community, symbolized by the DCA, the Dibert Community Association. In an earlier, less-mobile time, the business community held meetings in the school. When the building was less crowded, moms had their gatherings in part of the unused space. So when the school was in need of enrollment, the principal and staff and parents went out to the community to solicit interest and participation — to persuade them to place their children in Dibert. The DCA paid the registration fees for teachers to attend the curriculum conference, where they studied its potential for Dibert's use (while teachers each paid for their travel and hotel accommodations). There had been a sometimes subtle but symbiotic relationship between the community and school over the years that contributed to the school's operations.

4. The school was richly blessed with a series of talented and unique principals, each of whom was apparently the right person at the right time. Clif judged first principal Lucianne as the "embodiment of tenacity and beauty." How tenaciously she clung to and fought for the vision of a child-centered school! Her vision required that children be honored and respected for who they were and what they brought of themselves to school. Further, Lucianne's vision included children who respected and appreciated themselves, who had high self-esteem and self-regard. To this end, the potter (recall that Lucianne was an artist) encouraged teachers to use the arts — visual and performing — to provide children with opportunities for self-expression that would lead to feelings of self-worthiness. A fine consequence of this emphasis was that the children's projects made a drab building a nicer and more attractive place to spend the day.

Whereas Lucianne was the "quiet but forceful center of things," teachers observed that Clif was the "energymeister," cheerleading and bringing about bonding of faculty and children. "He's a people person, going around talking with and touching everyone, connecting to them and connecting them with each other." As part of his interactions with teachers, he would spontaneously suggest an afternoon volleyball game with the faculty, or encourage everyone to meet at the end of Friday afternoon for a beverage at the neighborhood gathering place. Teachers without fail acknowledged his energy and the way he used it to get the school turned around with a well-articulated and consistently enforced discipline process. Teachers studied the process together in the early days of Faculty Study, and through this activity they bonded together around a common goal.

Nancy's goals for the school included the achievement of increased teacher self esteem and the empowerment of teachers, parents, and students. She promoted activities with parents that would recognize and show appreciation for teachers. Nancy's goals also included freeing teachers to devote their attention to professional development and innovative practices for children, practices they had been empowered to develop themselves. She was an "organizer, businesslike, a structural leader, managing the resources." By proactively streamlining procedures and processes, she was able to reduce administrivia and other distractions.

Each succeeding principal maintained the evolving culture — its values, beliefs, and operations — and added to it. Such was the case with Wiley, the current principal. Clif had commented that, some years earlier, the staff wanted to think about academics, but first they needed to tend to the culture. Teachers report that Wiley has responded to that need by promoting interest in looking critically at the academic program and he has imbued it with his own expertise in curriculum. Teachers credit him with further influence on academics through his introduction of computer hardware and software. His concern for academic preparedness may stem from his previous position as assistant principal of a middle school that received part of Dibert's students. The features that described Dibert earlier remain in Wiley's administration; they have been institutionalized. For example, Morning Meeting happens daily, "We meet as a family to start the

day," explains Wiley. "It is a time when we can honor our students and applaud and celebrate their accomplishments."

In succession all four of these principals — the vision person, the people person, the organization person, and the academic person — added important dimensions to Dibert. None of it could have happened as it did, with a widely held vision and shared decision making, without the structures and schedules that permitted the conversation to develop in the first place: Morning Meeting, where everyone in the school shares the first twenty minutes of the day; and Faculty Study, where faculty as a learning community continue to learn, grow, and improve their work with children.

Creating a Learning Community at Dibert

John Dibert Elementary School sees itself as a family and a community of learners. Teachers are encouraged to innovate. They are involved in shared decision making, and they share a common vision of what the school should be and where it is headed. Reflection is encouraged. If conflict occurs, it is brought to the surface, shared openly, and resolved. The entire school learns together: students, teachers, parents, all. Teachers are continually discovering how to create and change their reality.

Earlier in this paper, the authors proposed that a learning community performs four functions essential to change and school improvement (Table 1). The following is an analysis of these functions and what the principals did to enable these functions to emerge.

Reducing Isolation

The principals and staff of this school worked to create a context that reduced isolation. From the beginning of the school's re-creation, its structure was established as family groupings of students and teachers. The principal worked with the teachers to reorganize the use of time in the school in order to provide one afternoon a week for learning together. The principal protected that time, which was used to work on problems identified by the staff and to learn about the Glasser method of discipline. Faculty Study, the name given to this afternoon time, was a significant factor in reducing isolation. This structure continues to the present. The current principal notes that time together has provided the staff with the opportunity to work through concerns and conflicts. Meeting together is so ingrained in the culture of the school that staff even met twice daily to share what they were learning while they were away at a national conference.

In addition, high levels of communication are enhanced by bulletins for faculty, parents, and the community, developed and disseminated by principals. Inviting the community into the school to hold meetings and see firsthand the programs that are in place has increased Dibert's communication with the external community.

Increasing Staff Capacity

Attendance at conferences is part of an ongoing pattern of increasing the staff's capacities. From the beginning, the first principal placed an emphasis on spending all available funds on staff learning opportunities. The staff was viewed as the most important resource, thus warranting high levels of investment. Most telling is a statement by one of the principals: "Unless the teachers are the primary learners in the building, the children don't learn much." One method of providing time for this learning was discussed above. Another method used by one of the principals was the elimination of several administrative procedures that diverted teachers' attention from teaching. The collection of lunch money, the completion of a complex daily attendance form, and an ineffective report card are three examples of such procedures that were either eliminated or streamlined.

Staff capacities have also been increased by their ongoing involvement in decision making, established by the first principal and insisted on by the teachers. This involvement has increased the staff's capacity to analyze needs and collectively plan to meet those needs. A sense that together they can create their future has been established. As one of the principals noted, "I felt like it was my job to empower the people around me."

Providing a Caring, Productive Environment

Dibert is characterized by its caring, productive environment. The re-invention of Dibert began as an effort to create just such an environment. One of the first principals invested time in identifying the faculty's personal issues and resolving them. *Be Kind and Share* was established in response to the principal's perception that discipline must be orderly and caring. *Be Kind and Share* continues to provide the basis for behavior in this rainbow school. Honoring diversity and communicating to all children that they are welcomed, are cared for, and are part of the Dibert family is another essential ingredient. Teachers, too, are honored, supported, and trusted; this honoring was the specific focus of action by one of the principals. Indeed, building trust has been a focus of all four principals. Morning Meeting, where students, teachers, and parents meet to celebrate successes, share work, and honor one another, sets the tone for each day.

Promoting Increased Quality

Finally, the culture of the learning community at Dibert promotes increased quality. Self-development, supported by as many good reading materials as possible, has been promoted by all principals for the staff and themselves from the beginning. An emphasis on the school's vision in every conversation pushed for increasing quality: "How do we create a happy place where children learn?" Once a happy place was created, the focus shifted somewhat to incorporate the students' academic learning outcomes, another aspect of the vision. The caring environment was maintained while the principals modeled and emphasized a focus on academic achievement. The need identified by the faculty for a

coordinated curriculum led to analysis of alternatives, but always in light of their vision, held as a beacon by the principal. Ongoing critical inquiry of this sort and norms of continuous improvement led the school to welcome outside researchers who might be another source of insight for them. The school staff seeks any and all information that they can use to increase the quality of students' experiences, as everyone at Dibert continues to learn and grow together as a community.

This school has created and maintained a learning-community culture in which children, teachers, administrators, and parents sustain and nurture one another as they *collectively* create their future.

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